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ABSTRACT

Methods for introducing and drilling grammatical structures in English as a second language (ESL) are presented for beginning teachers. Emphasis is on realistic contextualization and elicitation of spoken and written language through visual cueing in mechanical or meaningful exercises. The exercises are intended for small groups of college-bound ESL students but can be adapted to other types of students. Question formation is introduced through interview exercises, count and noncount nouns through picture description, comparatives through mathematical symbols, and the "so...that" construction through tall tales. (Author/RW)

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"HANDLES" FOR TEACHING GRAMMAR

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This paper for beginning teachers presents "tricks of the trade" for introducing and drilling specific grammatical structures. Emphasis is on realistic contextualization and elicitation of spoken and written language through visual cueing, in "mechanical" or "meaningful" (but not "communicative") exercises. The intended audience is intermediate, college-bound ESL students; suggestions for adaptation to higher or lower levels are given. Structures covered include yes/no and wh-questions, count and noncount nouns with there, the agent suffix -er, comparatives, and so . . . that and such . . . that.

Among TESL professionals, grammar often has the undeserved reputation of being as dry a subject to teach as it is for students to learn. Strictly speaking, of course, grammar pervades all language and should not be isolated to form a "classroom subject," so the traditional practice of subject division is perhaps to blame; we are now aware that language is a complex set of organically related, socially contextualized activities

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This paper is based on a presentation, "A Grab-bag of 'Handles' for Teaching Grammar," given by the author at the 1981 Bay Area CATESOL Mini-conference in Marin and again at the 1982 CATESOL State Conference in Sacramento.

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and not the simple sum total of Reading, Writing, Grammar, Listening Comprehension, and Pronunciation. However, given the administrative and other realities of the profession, this familiar curriculum design is here to stay in many ESL programs, and even teachers in more integrated programs are often called upon to do "grammar spots." Thus, for beginning teachers assigned to teacher grammar, the burning question is probably not so much whether classroom subjects are a Procrustean bed on which the communicative essence of language is destroyed -- in many ways they are -- but what, given the formidable-sounding task, they can do practically to make their lessons more interesting and profitable for their students. At such times, can they do better than run through the drills and explain the rules?

Those familiar with Winbell-Olsen's Communication Starters (1977) will appreciate the handiness of a collection of "tricks of the trade" for the times they have to sweat in the trenches, so to speak, left to their own resources by theoreticians and researchers. In the following paper, I will present some "handles" for introducing and drilling specific grammatical structures which beginning ESL teachers may find useful. Like Winbell-Olsen's, my collection is more a compendium than the fruits of one person's labor. Some have been passed on to me by colleagues; others I have come up with myself, but they probably arise from the "collective subconscious" of ESL teachers, so that any claim I lay to originality must be provisional. Unlike "communication starters," my "handles" are not meant to elicit genuine conversational exchanges. They are geared to predetermined grammatical structures. While they emphasize visual cueing and realistic contextualization, in Paulston and Bruder's scheme of types of drills, they are either "mechanical" or at most "meaningful," not "communicative" (1976:4-10). Teachers adopting them must be aware of the limitation, though there is no reason why the "handles" cannot form the basis of communicative activities.

The "handles" have been successfully used in small classes of 12 to 15 students, mostly college-bound foreign students of roughly intermediate proficiency, but with appropriate adaptation "up" or "down," most of them are usable in other classroom situations. Where applicable, caveats concerning their use will be given.

Question formation: "persona" interview A

To most ESL students newly arrived in this country, the importance of knowing how to ask questions cannot be overemphasized. These students often come from more traditional, teacher-centered classrooms where they are expected, and made, to answer questions but not to ask them. Once here, however, they cannot adequately socialize with native speakers (or, for that matter, among themselves if they are from different language groups) if all they can do is answer questions; such one-way communication will soon frustrate well-meaning interlocutors and

cut them off from further exposure to language input. But because asking a question in English, even about the simplest subject, is such a difficult operation involving the simultaneous manipulation of so many features, students need a great deal of practice before they can bring themselves to ask questions without undue hesitation.

Especially important questions are those used at the beginning of encounters between new acquaintances, such as "Where do you live?" "How long have you been here?" and so on; they serve not only to exchange information but also to establish "phatic communion." During the first days of class, teachers usually have students ask each other such questions, partly to practice question formation, partly to encourage friendships. However, this activity cannot be realistically sustained too long or repeated too often among students in the same group. The following "handle" allows repeated practice in the formation of such "formulaic" questions while keeping student interest.

The teacher collects beforehand various magazine pictures showing people with clearly defined roles or occupations, throwing in a few unusual jobs for variety (my collection includes a cowboy and a glassblower). The number of pictures used in each session depends on class size, time available, etc. For each picture, the teacher writes up a short "interview script" with about 10 question-and-answer exchanges numbered in sequence; the length and vocabulary level of the script may be adjusted according to student proficiency. In addition, there should be a set of "answer cards" on which only the answers from the script are transcribed, one on each card, numbered on the reverse side; lettering should be large, to ensure visibility from a distance. A typical interview script may look like this:

1. What's your name?
   Elizabeth Bennett.
2. What should I call you?
   Just call me Liz.
3. Where are you from?
   I'm from Illinois.
4. How long have you been here?
   Just six months. I moved to California in March.
5. How do you like California?
   Well, it's very nice, but I still miss home.
6. Where do you live?
   North San Jose. I have a one-bedroom apartment.
7. What do you do?
   I'm a computer programmer.

8. Where do you work?
   In a big insurance company.

9. How long have you been working there?
   About four months.

10. How do you like your job?
    I like it a lot. It's interesting and it pays well.

The game is played with one student serving as the "interviewee" -- here, "Liz" -- and the others as "reporters." "Liz" is given the entire package of script and answer cards and instructed to memorize all the answers. In the meantime, the picture is displayed; the teacher may lead a discussion on the picture, supply vocabulary, give warm-up drills on the formulaic questions, etc. When "Liz" is ready, she puts the script aside (but within easy reach), sits facing the class, and holds up the first answer card with the words "Elizabeth Bennett" facing out. The first reporter, upon this cue, asks "What's your name?" and "Liz" replies. The second reporter, seeing "Liz," asks "What should I call you?" and "Liz" replies, and so on. If "Liz" forgets an answer, she checks the number on the back of the answer card and finds the corresponding place in the script to help her through. Variations are possible. With a small class, students can work in pairs, one reporter to an interviewee, and then exchange pictures and play again. After oral practice, students can write down their questions as reinforcement. The teacher may keep a record of malformed questions and use them to review question-formation rules.

This format allows the teacher to closely control the structure of the questions desired for practice; a yes/no answer calls for a yes/no question while an informative answer calls for a wh- question. Student interest is easily maintained by the visual stimuli -- both the picture and the answer cards. Repetition is possible with changes in the cast of characters. For newcomers to American culture, the pictures also provide some informal cultural orientation in that the students learn to associate a certain "look" with a certain occupation or role. (A person who looks like nothing but a businesswoman may be misnamed a secretary by students from another culture.)

Note that, while the interview script has the form of a conversation, the exchanges are actually rigidly controlled and highly contrived; the aim is still grammatical drilling, not communication. However, the teacher must not simply throw realism out the window. The script must not be a random assortment of questions but should follow the conventions of such discourse; the sequencing of formulaic questions should reflect natural topic selection and maintenance; in the interest of "phatic communion," replies should not only furnish the asked-for information but should sometimes give "leads" on which the next question can be built (see exchanges 4 and 5 in the script given above.

Question formation: "persona" interview B

Like the previous activity, this one takes a cue from the Suggestopedia practice of giving fictitious foreign names and occupations to language learners (Stevick 1980:231-2), which, among other things, reduces their vulnerability and inhibitions. Here, after adequate preparation, students are allowed to ask personal questions normally considered inappropriate in American culture; since the personal questions are directed at a "persona," students are able to relax and enjoy the humor of the situation.

The teacher collects beforehand magazine pictures showing people with funny facial expressions or caught in unusual situations. (In my collection, for example, I have a yogurt-eating nun with a rapturous look on her face; a fat man in a hospital bed, looking pleased in spite of his woes, a huge bouquet of flowers on his chest; a newborn baby sleeping peacefully on a scale, etc.) Before conducting the persona interviews, the teacher discusses the cultural appropriateness of various personal questions, perhaps taking a few minutes to do the jazz chant "Personal Questions" (Graham 1978:23) as a warm-up activity. He/she then explains the game: an interviewee matched with a persona must answer all questions on behalf of this fictitious character, even potentially offensive ones. After matching interviewees and personas, the teacher puts up the pictures for the rest of the class to study, circulating to give assistance on grammar and vocabulary; beginning students should be given a little more time to prepare interesting questions, in written form if necessary.

The interviewee sits in the middle of a circle or sits facing the class to field questions; the reporters take turns asking questions. Some of the interesting questions that have come up in my classes include: for Luciano Pavarotti, "How much do you weigh?"; for TV-detective Kojak, "Why are you bald?"; for a handicapped mechanic, "What happened to your legs?" There are also, of course, your pedestrian questions from unimaginative students. But whatever the outcome, the activity is a light-hearted one that generates a lot of questions. The degree of structural control is smaller than in version A of the interview, but a malformed question from one reporter is often immediately corrected by the others. The teacher should feel free to step in whenever the personal questions exceed the bounds of good taste. Afterwards, he/she should perhaps re-emphasize that only in a game can culturally inappropriate personal questions be asked with impunity.

Count and noncount nouns with the existential <u>there</u> construction: picture description

Count and noncount nouns, with their attendant morphological and syntactic constraints, are among the most difficult

things in English to teach and learn. Traditionally, practice with count and noncount nouns is often provided by having students describe pictures, naming the components in sentences using the existential *there*. This is probably still the most convenient way. However since ESL students are known to avoid structures they find difficult (Schachter 1974), some control should be built into such exercises so that the students do not simply choose to talk about things that are easiest to describe. This is especially true of negative *there* sentences.

From my experience, I have found that pictures showing room interiors, with many pieces of furniture, work best for practicing count nouns, while pictures showing various foods are good for both count and noncount nouns, including those calling for "measure words" (like *slice* in *a slice of bread*). Both kinds of pictures are easily available from inexpensive magazines such as those sold at grocery store checkstands.

Structural control is achieved by giving carefully chosen cue words. In a typical exercise, the teacher holds up a picture showing a living room and gives the cue word, *chair*, in the singular. The first student called on makes a question, *Are there any chairs in this picture?* The second student answers, depending on what is in the picture, either *Yes, there is one* or *No, there aren't any*. The teacher then proceeds to another cue word and calls on another pair of students. Note that, for ESL students, the structures involved are far more difficult than they appear to the native speaker. The above question, for example, calls for not only word order inversion but also the choice of *any* over *some* and the conversion of the singular cue word to plural *chairs*. An affirmative answer demands verb agreement after *there*, depending on how many items are in the picture; a negative answer requires the rather unnatural choice of the plural verb plus *any* instead of *some*. The cue word system not only forces students to practice these complex structures but allows the teacher to ask about things not in the picture, thus creating occasions for using negative *there* sentences. The exercise outlined above can be used for written work too, in which case the cue words are supplied in a list.

Drills involving food pictures are similar, except that the choices the students are faced with are greater in number. Unlike discrete pieces of furniture, usually designated by count nouns, food words can be count, noncount or noncount plus "measure words," all apparently ungoverned by logic. As a culminating activity to reinforce oral drills on *there* sentences with count and noncount nouns, students can be asked to write descriptions of pictures showing complete meals in proper table setting; again easily found in magazines ranging from *Woman's Day* to *Bon Appetit*, such pictures have the advantage of including a little bit of everything. After writing their short compositions, students are then instructed to underline all the nouns used, putting *C* under count nouns and *NC* under noncount nouns.

Initial instructions should specify double-spacing, to allow room for the labels, and the inclusion of "measure words" as a kind of count noun. (Forgetting this, students sometimes write two glass of milk instead of two glasses.) The following is a sample description of a complete meal picture for a low intermediate class (students have been instructed not to underline "position words"):

This is a picture (C) of a delicious meal (C). There is a big plate (C) of chicken (NC) in the foreground of the picture (C). There is some rice (NC) on the plate (C). Also, there are some green peas (C). Next to the chicken (NC) there is a bowl (C) of green salad (NC). To the left of the salad (NC) there is a big yellow cake (C), but two pieces (C) have already been cut out. Behind the cake (C) there is a yellow teapot (C). There is also a bowl (C) of strawberries (C).

The agent suffix -er: the grab-bag (Thanks due to Patrick Cassidy, my former master teacher at San Francisco State University)

This is a good technique for introducing the structure of terms using the agent suffix -er and for drilling related sentence patterns for definitions.

The teacher puts together a "grab-bag" -- a plain brown paper bag containing various small, commonly-found gadgets with names ending in -er: pencil-sharpener, staple-remover, can-opener, bottle-opener, cookie-cutter, egg-beater, etc. In class, without first telling students what the lesson is going to be on, the teacher takes out the objects one by one and elicits their names, which are then put on the board, lined up so that the structure object of action + action verb + agent suffix -er is clearly shown. With low-level students, the teacher may be able to elicit little, having instead to supply most of the needed vocabulary; with intermediate students, usually at least one or two in the class can come up with the name for each object. In any case, whatever the proficiency, student interest seldom flags because of the constantly changing visual stimuli and of curiosity to find out the English terms for objects so frequently encountered in everyday life. After a long enough list has been made on the board, the teacher can stop to analyze the structure.

Depending on the level of the class, the teacher can go on to practice various sentence patterns associated with definitions.

For example, beginning students can work with the simple formula: This is a pencil-sharpener. It sharpens pencils. Special care should be taken to point out how pencil is singular in the name but plural in the defining sentence. With more advanced students, the definitions may take a more complex form with embeddings, such as A pencil-sharpener is a device that sharpens pencils. The drill can then be extended to objects too large for the grab-bag for which only pictures can be used, such as mixers, blenders, or windshield-wipers, or else to terms for occupations such as bus-driver and window-washer.

In sequencing items for presentation, one should keep those showing a consistent pattern together and save exceptions or deviations for later. For example, only after students have grasped the pencil-sharpener pattern should they be introduced to nouns like stapler or mixer with understood objects. The term hair-dryer, though resembling pencil-sharpener, does not call for It dries hairs (plural) but It dries hair (noncount hair). Irregularities like using cook instead of cooker for a person who cooks should also be pointed out.

Comparatives: mathematical symbols

Eliciting comparative forms for drilling is not an easy task. Good grammar drills should as much as possible bypass the mediation of verbal instructions in order to get students to concentrate on the meaning and structure used. However, this is difficult to do with comparatives because they involve so many variable features: two entities, the quality on which they are to be compared, and the direction of the comparison. (Indeed, the quality itself is not an absolute but already implies some kind of unspoken standard: what we normally call a short pencil is so only because of a conventional concept of what a pencil should look like; it can easily become a long pencil in comparison to an even shorter one.) An explicit instruction using a lot of "teacher talk" like Compare the red pencil and the blue pencil, using the adjective long is not very satisfactory. If one holds up the pencils one after another, miming to elicit the adjective long, verbal instruction is avoided, but the system falters when one moves on to compare less visible qualities. Finally, there is the difficulty of having to counteract possible confusion experienced by students over such patterns as much shorter or a little bigger, where there is some kind of semantic contradiction between the word showing the degree of difference and the word showing the quality being compared: much seems to imply, in some vague way, "greater," but shorter means "smaller." Is there a handy way to introduce and drill comparatives so that these difficulties can be minimized?

One solution lies in the use of the mathematical symbol >, which virtually all academic ESL students are already familiar with from their own schooling. It should be stressed right

away, however, that this "handle" is good only for such students, not for, say, adult school students who are barely literate even in their own languages. It is not worthwhile to introduce the symbol simply for the sake of teaching comparatives.

In a typical drill, the teacher places two pictures on the chalk ledge, say one of a station wagon and one of a compact, with some space between them. It is made clear that the comparative sentence should always start with the picture on the left (from the students' point of view). Now the teacher draws the symbol > between the pictures and supplies the cue word big. The sentence elicited is The station wagon is bigger than the compact, or, for students who already know the use of the plural for generic reference, Station wagons are bigger than compacts. The teacher goes on to other cue words like roomy or expensive (roomier, more expensive). To work on qualities in which compacts exceed station wagons, the teacher simply reverses the positions of the two pictures. (Do NOT change the mathematical symbol from > to < while keeping the pictures in place; that symbol would mean "less," as in Station wagons are less economical than compacts.)

This "handle" has several advantages. First of all, since not only the entities being compared but also the direction and nature of the comparison are visually accessible, students find it much easier to focus their attention on manipulating the structure. Because of the complexity of the comparative sentence, students sometimes forget parts of the structure; they may say Station wagons are more expensive, and, when reminded that something is missing, they may start putting the entire sentence together again only to find that they can't remember what quality is being compared. With the visual cues, the students can always anchor their productions to something concrete and can usually correct themselves by checking the board. To a student who comes up with Station wagons are expensive than compacts, the teacher can simply point to the mathematical symbol to elicit "more"; a verbal reminder would have given away the desired answer. When students experience difficulty remembering the qualities being compared, the teacher can put cue words on the board, lining them up with the symbol, between the pictures.

When the cue words are changed from adjectives to verb + object or verb + adverb (use gas, run smoothly), one obtains sentences like Station wagons use more gas than compacts and Station wagons run more smoothly than compacts. Once again, from minimal cues, students can concentrate on putting together complex comparative sequences.

The versatility of the "handle" does not end here. After students have some mastery of the basic comparative pattern, Compacts are smaller than station wagons, the teacher can erase the original mathematical symbol and immediately put one much bigger in its place, eliciting Compacts are much smaller than

station wagons. This way, students can see that two operations are involved in producing the latter sentence, first the basic comparison, then an indication of the degree of difference. The same thing can be done with a sentence like Station wagons are a little more expensive than compacts, by reducing the size of mathematical symbol conspicuously. A good mechanical drill would be to elicit comparative sentences while rapidly altering the size of the symbol. (This is, of course, not meaningful: one cannot describe something as much bigger and a little bigger in the same breath.) After the structure is firmly grasped by the students, meaningful drills can be conducted. Very advanced students can be taught to show degree of difference in sentences using verb + object (Station wagons use much more gas / carry many more passengers than compacts) or verb + adverb (Station wagons run much more smoothly than compacts).

A word should be said about the mathematical symbol for "smaller" $<$, mentioned earlier, which can be used for sentences using less + adjective. In many cases, less + adjective sounds unnatural (e.g. John is less tall than Bill), but students resist using John isn't as tall as Bill because of its apparent complexity, or else they try to get around the difficulty by changing the adjective to its opposite to get Bill is taller than John, which is, of course, also a true and correct statement. How can we get students to practice not as + adjective + as? The answer lies again in a mathematical symbol: $\neq$ for "not equal to." A drill on not as + adjective + as proceeds in much the same way as the one outlined above for $>$. Before drilling, while introducing the structure, the teacher should first establish the simpler relationship as + adjective + as, using the equal sign $=$, then put a slash through the equal sign to get not as + adjective + as; this way, something that appears syntactically complex is shown to be conceptually straightforward and thus less intimidating. Advanced students can apply the $\neq$ relationship to verb + object or verb + adverb constructions (Compacts don't use as much gas as station wagons; compacts don't run as smoothly as station wagons.)

So . . . that and such . . . that: tall tales

The so . . . that construction, whether with adjectives or adverbs, does not come easily to ESL students, yet must be learned early because of its usefulness. More advanced students must also grapple with such . . . that, which is similar to so . . . that in meaning but operates under different structural constraints. (So occurs predicatively while such occurs attributively; in addition, such cannot be used with adverbs.) "Tall tales," commonly found in children's joke books, provide a natural context for practicing both expressions because of the exaggeration they necessarily involve.

The problem with using tall tales from joke books directly is that structures and vocabulary their authors take for granted for native English-speaking youngsters are often far too

difficult for ESL students, even so-called advanced ones. This, for example, is a tall tale from a book intended for very young children, Jokes, Riddles, Funny Stories published by Grosset and Dunlap of New York (1978 printing):

> A man once grew so tall he had to climb a ladder to shave himself. And whenever he wanted to put his hands in his trouser pockets, he had to get down on his knees. He could eat nothing but freshly killed meat, else it would spoil before it reached his stomach. As it was, hot soup froze before it got there.

Teachers using tall tales in ESL classes must therefore very carefully adapt them to the proficiency of the students; jokes that take five minutes to explain are no longer very funny.

For low-level students, tall tales can simply be presented after a unit on so . . . that for sheer fun; such students greatly enjoy being able to laugh at jokes told in English. Alternatively, the stories can be given to the students first; after student interest is kindled, the teacher can elicit observations on the structure repeated in each story and from there go on to rules and drills. The following are some examples of tall tales simplified for beginning ESL students.

> Once upon a time there was a very tall man. He was so tall that when he had hot soup, the soup froze before it reached his stomach.

> Once upon a time there was a very thin student. He was so thin that when he stood sideways, the teacher thought he was absent.

Here, the so . . . that structure is limited to adjectives, the originals are split up into shorter sentences, and the structures are kept similar. Slightly more proficient students can be introduced to so . . . that with adverbs. (Once upon a time there was a man who lived very quickly. He lived so quickly that he became older than his father.) Advanced students can practice converting so . . . that sentences into such . . . that sentences. For example, There was a man whose eyes were so big that when he winked, the wind from his eyelids blew out a candle becomes . . . a man who had such big eyes that . . . . Finally, students of all levels can be asked to write their own tall tales; even stale jokes in one culture can be refreshing to people from another culture, and students with a keen sense of humor may produce wonderfully creative stories.

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